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ABSTRACT

The operative principle behind the use of essays as models for composition is that if students study and imitate the wide variety of rhetorical forms in an essay collection they will write well-organized and fluent papers. Unfortunately, when students are asked to copy forms the result is a clearly organized paper that says very little and has taught them less. Learning to write a paper is not a matter of learning mechanical rules, but of learning to think analytically. The student who can write an evocative description of a personal experience will go on to write a poorly organized academic paper, but personal experience writing can teach analytical thinking and the relationship between analyzing specific data and writing an organized paper. As students discover this process, they will soon recognize that notes, drafts, and revisions are a necessary part of the writing process and understand that thesis, topic sentence, and supportive evidence are not a prescriptive imposition, but the logical result of careful analytical thinking. At this point, students are ready to read the model essays, not as examples of how to write, but of how to read before they write in other courses, to progress from analysis of personal experience to analysis of readings. College composition should be a course in critical reading and writing, skills essential to every other academic discipline. (HTH)

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Session A-3
USING READERS IN COMPOSITION COURSES: PROS AND CONS

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A CRITIQUE OF READERS AS MODELS FOR COMPOSITION

I have no quarrel with the material in many essay collections. Readers have introduced me to specific essays and authors that have worked well in my classes. (Unfortunately, my average is about three or four good ones in each essay collection.) What I quarrel with is the premise that underlies these collections, a premise that has a long literary tradition, that essays be used as models for composition. The idea is that students should read only essays because they will be writing essays. The operative educational principle is imitation. If students study and then imitate the wide variety of rhetorical forms in an essay collection, they will write well-organized and fluent papers. Unfortunately, we have all discovered that when students are asked to copy forms, they stop thinking. They choose to "prove" the simplest concepts, generally commonly held beliefs or clichés, which do not reflect their intellectual capacity, simply so that they can satisfy our demands for a particular rhetorical structure. The result is a clearly-organized paper that says very little and has taught them even less. Frequently, instead of being inspired by the polished style of an author, they are intimidated by it. Actually, imitating the work of other writers is extremely difficult, an art suitable for an advanced course

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in rhetoric. It was probably perfect for the well-schooled aristocrats of 18th or 19th century England. Frankly, I am delighted if by the end of one semester, my students can master a single, all-purpose organizational structure: An introduction containing a thesis, a body supporting it, and a conclusion restating that thesis and reaching for an implication, will do just fine. Incidentally, this pedestrian academic structure is used in very few published essays. But more important than mastering a structure, I hope my students understand the many analytic processes that must occur before structure emerges. Central to this approach is my belief that most writing problems do not occur at the sentence level, but are organizational, and that learning to organize a paper is not a matter of learning mechanical rules, but of learning to think analytically.

Unfortunately, using readers as models for composition fosters the opposite belief - that the writer starts with a thesis and supporting ideas intact and simply has to choose a structure or form to put them in. On the contrary, we know that the writer usually starts with bits and pieces of unassimilated material from experience and reading, along with a hunch that these might relate to one another. It is essential that students realize that writing is generally not an act of recording what you already know, but of discovering what you want to say. They must experience the painstaking process of figuring out what they want to say in notes and drafts, developing ideas, casting out old ones, shifting to new ones, to permit each thesis and argument to emerge gradually.

Most important, I believe students need to discover this process before they are confronted with readings - the finished products. Therefore, I prefer to begin courses with a highly-structured approach to writing from personal experience and introduce readings later. In the best of all possible worlds, this would be done in a two-semester English sequence with small classes and individual conferences. But much of it can also be accomplished in a single semester.

All of us have seen how eloquently most students write about personal experience and how sharply their writing improves when they do. However, we soon find, to our chagrin, that there is almost no transferability from free writing about experience to the writing of academic papers. The student who is able to write a detailed, evocative description of an event in his or her own life will go on to write a poorly organized academic paper in lacklustre prose. While the English teacher is celebrating a student's success, the political science teacher is wondering whether they can possibly be talking about the same student. There are two reasons for this lack of transferability. The first is that writing about personal experience does not teach analytical thinking and the relationship between analysis of material and the organization of a paper. Descriptions of personal experience, after all, are usually organized chronologiccally: in other words, a student need never worry about "how to organize" such a paper. The second reason is that academic papers in all other disciplines require another area of expertise -

active reading skills. Few of our students read with attention, few can pick out the thesis of an essay, can follow a logical argument, read for implication, recognize bias. Thus students can't write academic papers first because they don't understand what is involved in the writing process, and second because they have nothing to say about what they read.

Those of us who believe that English Composition is a course that should imporve the ability of students to write papers in <u>all</u> of their courses have a difficult job if we are to address both of these areas.

I begin by using personal experience as a way of teaching analytical thinking and the relationship between analyzing specific data and writing an organized paper. I do this through a highly structured series of assignments. Only after students have understood this process do I turn to readings, readings that approximate the readings they will be asked to do in other classes.

Since I believe that the impulse to write is related to our desire to figure something out, I begin with what I know interests my students most -- themselves. I use their need to understand themselves as a way to teach the process of analytic thinking and its relationship to organizing a paper. I begin with assignments that ask them to analyze chunks of personal

experience -- self-analysis, and I end by asking them to analyze research and readings -- academic analysis. As the course progresses, they realize that in both self-analysis and academic analysis, the process is similar.

Usually teachers who use personal experience ask for descriptions. I ask for much more. I insist they search for the meaning in a chunk of personal experience and eventually state that meaning as a thesis, a statement that will focus and organize their papers. Here is how it works: I say, choose a specific geographic place you have known and figure out why it is important to you. One of my most ingenuous students began by describing a place that was particularly beautiful to her as a child growing up in California. It was only after she had written a rather detailed description in a first draft that she realized that the choice of the term "beautiful" was insufficient to express the meaning of this place. I pointed out to the class that "beautiful" was much like the vague generalizations such as "important" or "interesting" that students sometimes choose for academic papers. She had used certain kinds of details to describe this beauty - precipitous coastline, wind-swept cliffs - and had likened the movement of the grass to that of a rattlesnake. Once she recognized the pattern in these details as frightening, she realized that for her, natural beauty had to contain an element of danger, an element beyond her control. This recognition became her thesis. This particular student was one whose teachers had complained of her inability to develop

abstract concepts in her academic papers. Here she was able to understand what the process of abstraction involved, allowing the material -- the details being examined -- to dictate the label.

Another student wrote a paper contrasting two Brooklyns, the Brooklyn described to him by his father and the Brooklyn of his own childhood. He soon realized that labeling the two as simply"different" would be inadequate for a thesis. To develop his thesis, he had to examine the details of each place in order to discover the contrasting patterns and to define them with the appropriate abstraction. He recognized that his father's legendary Brooklyn had been secure, a community united against the mainstream, as exemplified by its deification of the maverick Brooklyn Dodgers. His Brooklyn had been threatening, a fragmented conglomerate, estranged not only from the mainstream but from itself, as exemplified by its acceptance of street gangs whose loyalty was to a single intersection. Listing details of each setting and then labeling them with these contrasting terms became from the beginning an exercise in understanding, not simply word manipulation. It is interesting that when this same student was asked to write a conclusion and told to "reach for an implication beyond the material in your paper," he realized that in writing the paper he had had to resist the impulse to romanticize his own experience of Brooklyn, to avoid turning a street gang into something out of West Side Story. This made him question whether his father had perhaps turned his Brooklyn into a legend: perhaps it hadn't

really been like that at all.

Although I do not suggest it, my students recognize that they need notes and at least two drafts of a paper to discover and state the most appropriate thesis and that very often a more profound and subtle thesis is hidden within the more obvious one. My students begin to understand that writing is a way of figuring something out, that such structural elements as a thesis statement at the beginning of a paper and topic sentences at the beginning of each paragraph are not in your head and just have to be written down, but must emerge as you examine and re-examine the material.

Because I believe in writing as a process of discovery rather than a recording process, I suggest to my students that they ask question after question about their experience. Later they will use questions to help them understand their readings.

The second paper examines an aspect of a relationship they have had with someone, and the third explores an internal conflict they have experienced along with its resolution or lack of resolution. Because relationships and conflicts are progressively more difficult to define, their analysis demands higher levels of abstract thinking than did the consideration of a geographic place. But again, both the relationship paper and the conflict paper forces students to examine concrete details, analyze them to find a pattern within them, and finally label that pattern

with some abstract terms which will then be developed into a thesis sentence. More important, students discover that the necessity for thesis, topic sentence, and supportive evidence is not a prescriptive imposition, but is the logical result of careful analytical thinking.

Although the fourth paper utilizes personal experience, it represents a movement towards the typical academic paper. I ask students to state a strong opinion they have on a subject of general significance, an opinion that they believe they have developed as a result of personal experience. Then I ask them to re-examine their experience to see if the thesis truly expresses its significance. One student began with a thesis advocating legalized abortion, an opinion she said was based upon her experience accompanying a friend who had had a legal abortion. Nevertheless, when she examined her own description of that experience, she realized that her thesis had to be more complex than a simple pro or con. She found that although she still believed in legalization, it raised new issues, such as the need for psychological counseling. She would have been ignoring the pattern in the concrete details of that experience if she had not changed her thesis. She had to refine the opinion to as sharp a statement as possible and edit the personal experience to support that opinion most persuasively.

By this time, students understand the relationship between

thought and writing. They realize that the thesis which appears at the beginning of their papers will be discovered quite late in the process. They are also convinced that the writing process has taught them something, and they have been surprised by their own creativity.

Now they are ready to work with readings. As to the choice of readings, I concentrate on non-fiction, using a variety of essays and one or two books each semester. I do this, not with the assumption made by readers, that students will be writing non-fcition and therefore should be reading it. I choose non-fiction not because it duplicates what students will write -- the essay -- but what they will have to read before they write -- philosophy, political science, sociology, history. College instructors in these disciplines generally assume students already know how to "read" and most do not feel they need go over assigned readings in detail. Lectures frequently expect an understanding of the major points of the reading and take off from there. Some students avoid the reading altogether, learning that they can rely on lecture notes when they take their exams. However, when it comes to writing a paper, students must rely on readings, and this is where they fall apart.

I find material that will be applicable to other disciplines in newspapers and magazines. I also use essays from readers, but have never found one reader I can use extensively. I ask for suggestions from my colleagues in other disciplines and add

essays, chapters, and books that reflect the concerns of their discipline but require no specialized knowledge. One benefit of this exchange is that I develop a dialogue with instructors of other disciplines and they have begun to think even more about what their students are reading and what writing assignments are appropriate in their own courses. Although I emphasize non-fiction, I generally include a few short stories. The short story requires a particular type of reading, reading for inference. As one of my students once said, "Oh I understand, fiction is examples." What fiction does not teach, I believe, is the ability to read difficult abstract material and to identify and trace a logical argument.

I begin with the kind of reading that enables us to duplicate the process of analysis we have used in finding theses about personal experience. I use an autobiographical essay, a diary entry, a short descriptive sketch, a personal letter: the diary of a forty-niner, a section of the Autobiography of Malcolm X or the Diary of Anne Frank , a letter from Abigail Adams to her husband. I select pieces which themselves contain little analysis. Then I ask students to trace the pattern and state a thesis about someone else's life, just as they did about their own. It is a short step to the next reading task, which is to give students a healthy suspicion of all readings, a full recognition that all writing is subjective. I want to break down the awe with which students approach the written word. So I give them that classic assignment: three descriptions of the same news event, each from

a different newspaper. Again the students have to examine the details of each newspaper account in order to label the implied, rather than stated, theses.

By now they are trained in developing their own generalizations. They recognize that writers make conscious choices. They are ready to tackle what I, and they, consider the tough readings. These are readings that are essentially theoretical and contain their own abstract statements. I begin with short editorials from the newspapers. It is hard for students to identify an author's thesis even when it is clearly stated, and it is even harder for them to find the supporting ideas. But I think it is part of our job to teach this process if students are ever able to write papers about readings such as these. I organize these essays thematically: a group on ecology, or on urban housing, or on the changing relationship of men and women. The next few assignments ask for a summary of the thesis and supportive ideas in an essay. Here I introduce a set of seven questions which the students can internalize to approach every persuasive essay and eventually every book that develops a thesis. 1. What does the writer see as the problem? 2. What kinds of evidence does he/she use to show there is a problem? 3. Who or what does the author blame for the problem? 4. What solution is offered? 5. What arguments does the author present to show this solution will work? 6. Is there any prediction for the future? 7. Can you identify any bias in the author's use of argument or choice of evidence? Using these questions, students go on to approach any essay or book-length work and have something to say about it. The class may do one book, say

Kubler-Ross's book On Death and Dying. They then may choose one on their own and duplicate the process. The writing consists of stating the main and supportive ideas.

The next assignments teach students to relate one reading to another. First they relate a theoretical essay to specific data, either personal experience, historical letter or diary, a case study. For example, Erich Fromm's essay, "Alienation Under Capitalism" can be related to Studs Turkel's accounts of workers describing their work or to the student's own work experience. Fromm's ideas provide the thesis and topic sentences, Turkel's workers the supportive evidence. Finally, we proceed to assignments that compare the theories of two writers, stating essential similarities and differences in the thesis and building the structure of the paper from there. We might use Locke and Hobbes on human nature, Malthus and Barry Commoner on the sapping of the earth's resources.

What I am suggesting then is a movement from analysis of personal experience to analysis of readings. And with the readings themselves, a non-literary approach to non-literary material. This is sometimes difficult for those of us who have our advanced degrees in literature, who delight in matters of form and style, who are most comfortable analyzing poetry and fiction. Yet we can use the analytical skills we have developed in our studies of literature, the close textual analysis which we enjoy. And we can use the abilities we have developed to involve students with

readings in the course of teaching literature. But we should apply these abilities to readings that reflect our students' and our own interest in psychological, philosophical, political and economic issues, readings that will also reflect the material of which academic papers are made.

I believe we are at the cutting-edge on our campuses. Unlike most instructors, we cannot lecture on a subject, give an exam, assign a term paper, and feel we have succeeded. We cannot deceive ourselves as to our students' understanding of the reading or their ability to write. We read their weaknesses in their papers every day. I think the times and the needs of the current college population have to make us re-examine the connection between English Composition and literature. We can no longer see English Composition as a course in beginning literature. We have to meet this challenge by developing a new discipline with new goals. We have to affirm our commitment to Critical Reading and Writing, a course that is essential to every other discipline on the campus.

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